NJS Presents

Teaching NJ History

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Teaching Thomas Edison Using Primary Sources

By Steve Santucci with Jonathan Dowler

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In this edition of “Teaching NJ History,” West Morris Mendham High School History Teacher Steve Santucci shares information to assist educators who wish to teach Thomas Edison using primary sources. Mr. Santucci has presented on teaching with primary sources at several conferences over the past few years, most recently at the 2018 NJ History Forum at Monmouth University, “Greetings from New Jersey: Popular Culture and the Garden State.” There, he presented on Edison with fellow West Morris Mendham teacher Jonathan Dowler.

Primary sources are no doubt powerful teaching tools, for any topic; but students definitely require scaffolding when using them. Encourage them to remember the H.I.P.P.O. when evaluating material from the past: they should be able to identify the Historical Context; the Intended Audience; the Point of View; and the Purpose; and they should also be able to articulate an Overview of the source.
Edison and Pop Culture: Primary Documents

Hello! Santy!! Cartoon by Albert Reid, courtesy of the Kansas Historical Society. In this humorous cartoon, Reid depicts the cultural icon Santa Claus as he is about to fill a stocking with gifts. Santa is shocked and alarmed when the newfangled phonograph blurs out a recording of the child's Christmas wish list.

http://www.phonographia.com/Phonotoons.htm
February 9th, 1927.

Mr. Wm. H. Meadowcroft,
Historian-Edison Pioneers,
Edison Laboratory,
Orange, N.J.

My dear Mr. Meadowcroft:

Attached, you will find a clipping taken from the Newark, (N.J.) Evening News of February 8th, concerning the matter of observing the date of February 11th, as a national holiday and as being the true birth date of George Washington; which has greatly interested me and doubtless will also be of interest to you when considering the matter of this in connection with our celebrating the birthday of Mr. Edison.

It has occurred to me that it might be well to look somewhat into the future from a historical viewpoint as to the significance of simultaneously honoring the date of birth of George Washington, our first President, and Thomas A. Edison, our greatest inventor.

Without the Edison inventions we would not now have our other great inventions, mainly they all seem to be derived from vibration, and that is probably the fundamental basis of all the greatest inventions of our time.

I feel that we, as Pioneers, should do all we can to have this matter of February 11th followed up as closely as possible along the lines of combining the honoring of two of our greatest men. The Pioneers will have done a very great work were they to bring this to pass.

With the hope and pleasure of meeting you next Friday, I am, as ever,

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

Courtesy Thomas Edison National Historical Park.
From the Laboratory of Thomas A. Edison, Orange, N.J.

December

fifth

1880

To His Holiness, Pope Pius XI,
Bishop of Rome and
Vicar of Jesus Christ.

Your Holiness:

The art of written communication has come down thru
the ages from rude rock carvings to its apex,
reached in the combination of devices for re-
cording the human voice and for reproducing it
at will in order to reduce the utterances to
writing.

The inventor of these devices, Thomas Alva Edison,
has combined them into a practical combination
for voice-writing called the Ediphone and it is
his desire to have the privilege of respect-
fully tendering to Your Holiness a complete set
of this practical and simple apparatus.

With assurances of esteem,

Yours respectfully,

Thomas A. Edison

Ediphoned-C

Courtesy Thomas Edison National Historical Park.
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Thomas A. Edison
Orange, N.J.

June 26, 1923

Providence

Dear Mr. Edison,

We are in receipt of a letter of June 23 from the factory at Orange requesting information concerning our Edison Phonograph stock. Our stock on hand consists of 69 Edison Phonographs as per enclosed list. Under present selling conditions we will need very little new phonograph stock for next three or four months.

Factory letter of June 23 says a "fairly good volume of Edison Phonograph sales can be expected this fall and winter." Due to a city-wide interest in radio, especially noticeable from September 1923 and continuing strongly throughout this spring, our Phonograph and record sales have reached a point where we are anxiously looking forward to a reaction to the Phonograph in the coming fall and winter. Providence has four large broadcasting stations, two of them of transcontinental size.

Due directly to radio our December 1923 Phonograph and record sales were a quarter of the December 1922 sales.

In the past year to boost Edison Phonograph sales we have:
1. Used newspaper advertising.
2. Increased our mailing list. (Record release folders)
3. Sent out a great deal of Edison literature with our monthly store magazine.
4. Followed our jobber's suggestion that we offer six Edison Records to any of our owners who give us the name of a prospect whom we sell.
5. Maintained a good repair service.
6. Made personal calls on owners to get prospects.
7. Offered needle machine owners liberal terms in exchange for Edison Phonographs.
8. Maintained a good record stock.
9. Broadcast Edison Phonograph Concerts from our store Radio Station WSAD during the year.

We would be grateful for a frank opinion on the prospects for Edison Phonograph sales this coming fall and winter. It would be particularly interesting if the factory has any information concerning Edison sales conditions in other large cities in the east, Philadelphia, New York, etc., who have passed thru or are passing thru a period of radio competition such as we have here. Mr. Edison, we would like very much to hear personally from you on this subject.

Very truly,

Fosters

Chautauqua Institution
A System of Popular Education
Founded in 1874
by Sabina Miller and John Q. Vincent

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Chautauqua, N.Y.
July 3, 1930

Mrs. Thomas A. Edison,
Llewellyn Park,
West Orange, N.J.

My dear Mrs. Edison:

Miss Smith has sent me your radio talk which you are to deliver over WJZ and associated stations on Monday at 5 o'clock. We are planning to receive this and broadcast it in the Amphitheater. We do deeply appreciate your willingness to perform this important service.

I understand that a representative of the Paramount News Reel Company is planning to be at the broadcasting station on Monday prepared to make a few pictures and then these are to be shown in all of the motion picture theatres in the country. Of course, no publicity could be more valuable to us at the beginning of our season.

I know that you will be willing to say a few words and allow them to take a picture. I have taken the liberty of drawing up a few sentences which from our point of view would be most worth while. Of course, you will change these in any way you think wise. I have formulated them to make it as easy as possible for you and also to indicate the sort of things which would be most helpful to Chautauqua.

Cordially yours,

Arthur Eugene Bestor

“The Decadence of the Wizard of Meno Park. – From the Phonograph to Polyform,”
_Puck_ Magazine Centerfold; Vol. VI No. 155, May 5, 1880
Edison and Pop Culture: Activities

Have students choose one of the documents and answer the following questions:

Historical Context:
1. What was going on when the author created the document? How does this information assist in better understanding the document?

Intended Audience:
2. Identify the person or group the author expects to inform or influence. How might this affect the reliability or accuracy of the source?

Point of View:
3. Who is the author and what is their main idea? How does the author’s background impact their written perspective? (Race, class, gender, age, religion, occupation, nationality.)
Purpose:
4. What was the author trying to accomplish when creating this document? Did they have ulterior motives than what is at face value? (Persuade, establish, Expose, Discredit, Justify, etc.)

Overview:
5. What does the document actually say or reveal? BRIEFLY summarize the key and relevant information from the source.
Steve Santucci has been teaching High School History and Social Studies for the past 20 years, concentrating on both US I & II, as well as World and European History (on the Advanced Placement level). He has also taught electives in Economics, American Government, and politics and sociology. Mr. Santucci currently works at West Morris Mendham High School. His co-presenter, when sharing this work at the 2018 NJ History Forum, was Jonathan Dowler. Mr. Dowler has for the past 5 years taught Advanced Placement History United States History and World History at West Morris Mendham High School.